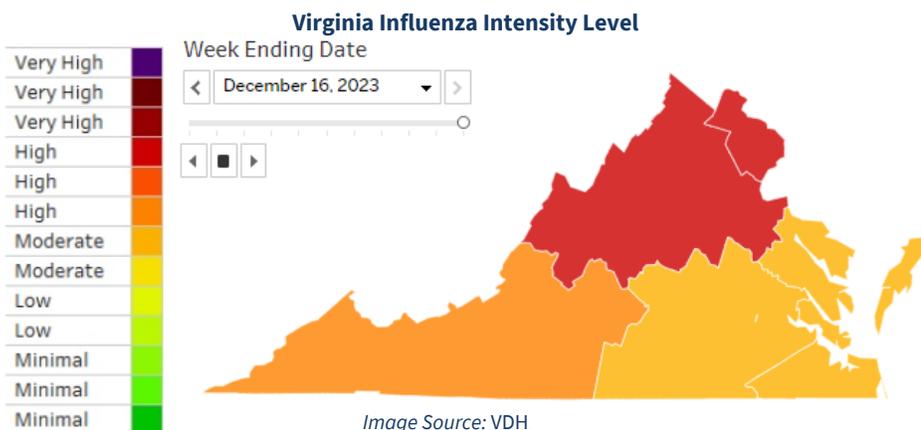
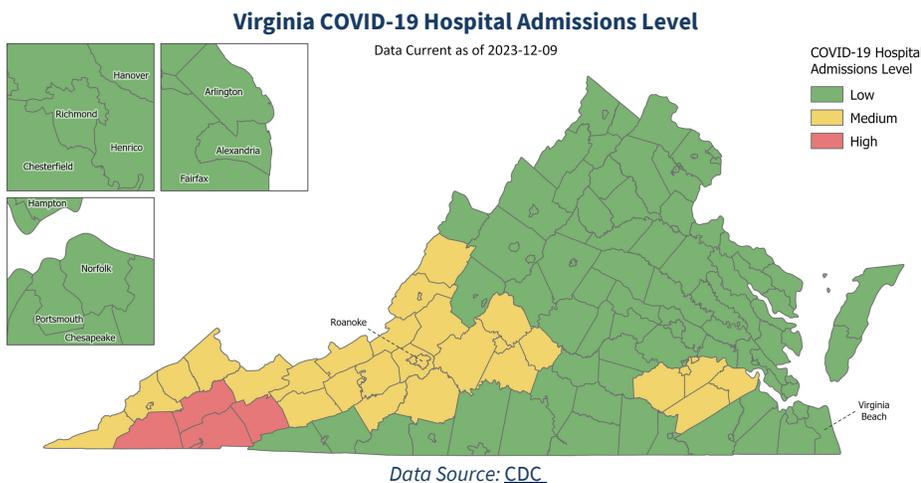


December 22, 2023

Key Takeaways

- COVID-19 activity continues to increase across the Commonwealth. Hospitalizations for COVID-19 are up marginally. Models suggest that hospital admissions will remain static through the year’s end. Statewide admissions levels are still classified as “Low”, but five localities in Southwest Virginia are now reporting “High” admissions levels.
- The JN.1 variant is now a WHO Variant of Interest. It is expected to become dominant in the coming weeks. Current vaccines are thought to offer protection against JN.1 and other emerging variants.
- Flu activity continues to increase as RSV activity drops slowly. Flu hospital admissions have nearly doubled in the last month. Models expect continued increase in flu hospital admissions through January.
- Norovirus rates are increasing in the American South. Physicians note a rise in gastrointestinal disease in the Commonwealth.
- A meningococcal disease outbreak is reported among children in Ohio.

Key Figures



COVID-19

Low

Characterization of statewide COVID-19 hospital admissions and hospital occupancy as of December 16.

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Localities with “High” / “Medium” COVID-19 hospital admissions levels as of December 9.

Influenza

High

Statewide influenza activity levels in Virginia, as of Dec 16.

3 of 5

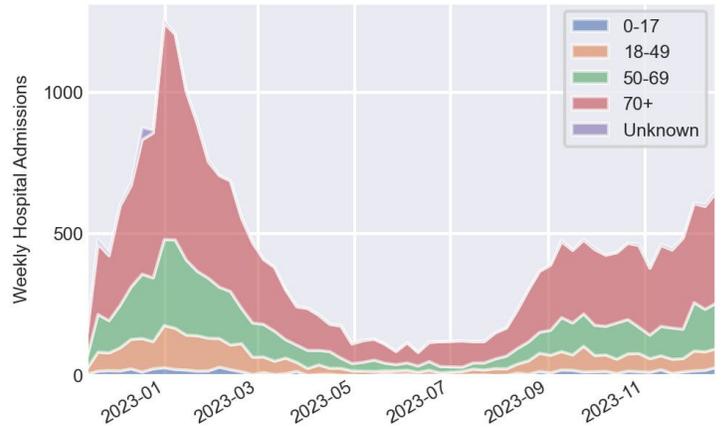
Virginia regions with a High influenza intensity level, as of Dec 16. The other two are at Moderate levels.

Spotlight:
 The COVID-19
 JN.1 Variant

Seasonal Illness

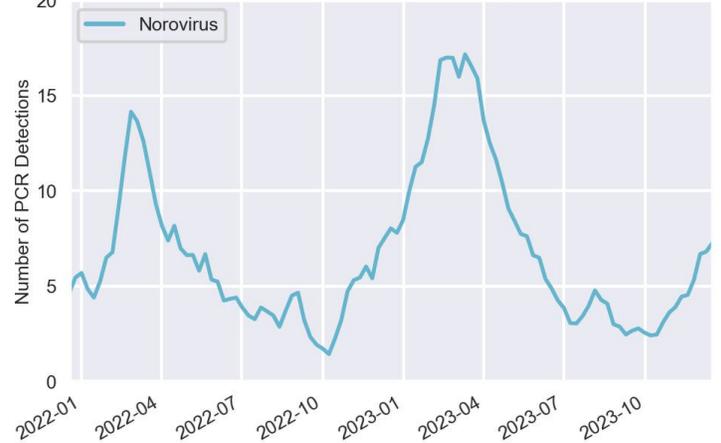
- **COVID-19 activity continues to increase in Virginia.** COVID-19 diagnoses at Emergency Departments grew slightly. Wastewater viral loads are in plateau, but five sample sites are showing above average viral loads. This suggests continued mild increases.
- **Flu activity increases in Virginia as RSV falls.** Three of the five regions of the Commonwealth are now reporting “High” levels of flu activity. Officials note flu may peak later this year than last year. RSV rates may have crested and begun a slow decline.
- **COVID-19 hospital admissions increase slowly, flu admissions surge.** COVID-19 hospital admissions increased 5.5% this week, while flu admission jumped 43%. CDC forecasts suggest that COVID-19 associated hospital admissions will remain steady, while flu admissions will continue to increase.
- **Respiratory illness closes schools in several states.** School closures due to respiratory viruses and strep throat have caused K-12 school closures in Michigan, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania, as well as in Chattanooga and Pulaski County, Tennessee.
- **Norovirus growth seen across the South.** Data from Census Region 1 (including Virginia) show detections have doubled since October. Last season, Norovirus peaked in the region in mid-February. The virus also caused a major outbreak in North Carolina last week, after 241 people were exposed at a sushi restaurant.

Hospital Admissions for COVID-19 by Age Group in Virginia



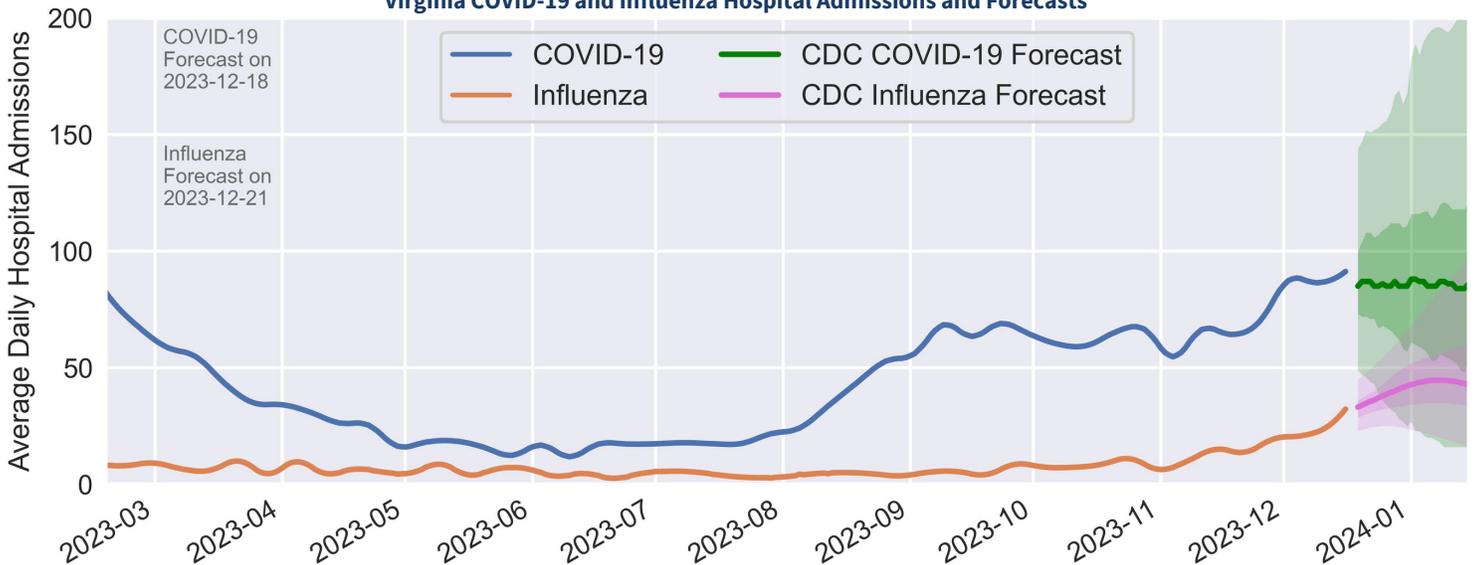
Adults over 70 represent the majority of new COVID-19 hospitalizations. Data Source: [HealthData.gov](https://healthdata.gov).

PCR Detections of Norovirus in Census Region 1 (inc. VA)



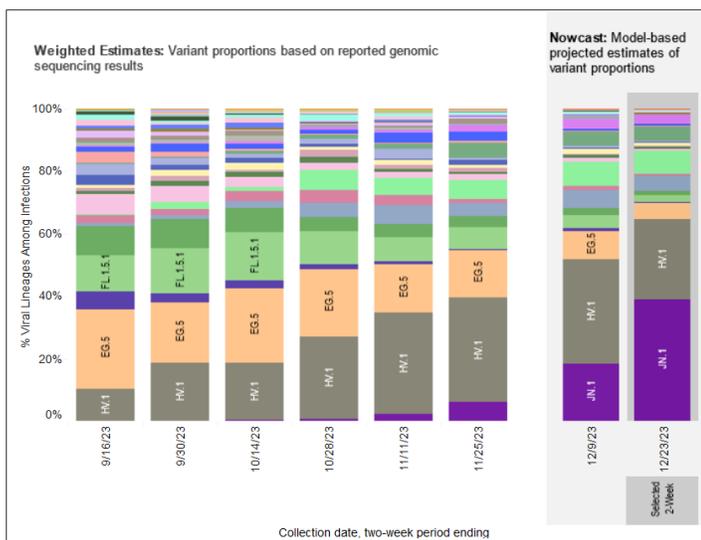
New Norovirus growth is being reported in the South. Data Source: [CDC](https://www.cdc.gov).

Virginia COVID-19 and Influenza Hospital Admissions and Forecasts



Models suggest continued growth of hospitalizations in the coming weeks. 50% and 95% CIs are shown as dark and light shading respectively. Historical data source: [HealthData.gov](https://healthdata.gov), COVID-19 forecast data source: [CDC CFA](https://www.cdc.gov), flu forecast data source: [CDC FluSight](https://www.cdc.gov).

Spotlight



The JN.1 variant continues to grow in HHS Region 3 (including Virginia). It could become the dominant variant by year's end. Source: CDC.

The COVID-19 JN.1 Variant

- **The JN.1 variant of COVID-19 designated a “Variant of Interest” by WHO.** The variant, which derives from the earlier BA.2.86, has recently been upgraded to a Variant of Interest. These are variants “with genetic changes that are predicted or known to affect viral characteristics” and have a growth advantage over circulating variants.
- **JN.1 exhibits some immune escape characteristics.** The JN.1 variant has been linked to rising national COVID-19 cases. CDC officials note that “continued growth of JN.1 suggests that it is either more transmissible or better at evading our immune systems.” Nevertheless, there is evidence that the 2023-24 COVID-19 vaccines offer protection against newly emerging variants, including JN.1.
- **JN.1 may become dominant by year’s end.** With an estimated 90% relative growth advantage over currently circulating variants, JN.1 is expected to out-compete its peers. Experts suggest it could become the dominant variant by the Holidays.

- **Symptomatically, JN.1 is similar to other variants.** Despite the growth advantage, there is “no evidence that it causes more severe illness” than its peers. The same is true of BA.2.86 from which JN.1 derives.

Other News

- **Supply chains may become strained.** Shipping companies are diverting ships from the Red Sea and Suez canal due to maritime attacks. Meanwhile, transit at the Panama Canal continues to be hindered by a severe drought.
- **The Federal Aviation Administration is naming a panel of experts to review air traffic controller fatigue.** This follows reports of several near-miss incidents this year, including one at Reagan National Airport in March and of a possible 25% increase in runway incursions over the past decade.
- **Avian flu outbreaks continue to impact poultry farms.** In the past month, the illness was detected in 32 commercial flocks and another 24 backyard flocks, affecting over 8.6 million birds across the US. This past week, new outbreaks were also reported in Asia and Europe.
- **Consumption of pre-cut cantaloupe linked to Salmonella outbreak.** Over 300 cases have been reported between October 16 to November 28, with 129 hospitalizations and four deaths in the U.S. In addition, a recall has been issued for granola products due to possible Salmonella contamination, but no cases related to the recall have been reported.
- **A diphtheria outbreak has spread rapidly in Nigeria over the last few months, with around 500 cases reported each week.** Effective containment of the outbreak has been further complicated by the limited availability and high cost of treatment.
- **Amish community in Ohio faces meningitis outbreak.** All cases have been reported among children under 8, and medical countermeasures have been provided to community residents to limit the spread of illness.